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Article

Mothers Left without a Man: Poverty and Single Parenthood in China

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Abstract

Most single-parent families in China are headed by women, and single mothers represent one of the fastest-growing groups living in poverty. Yet few studies have examined this group. This article seeks to better understand how (and why) single mothers are disadvantaged in China. Based on in-depth interviews conducted in Zhuhai, Guangzhou Province, it demonstrates that single mothers are left behind in four respects: lower income and worse economic conditions, lower employment and career development opportunities, worse physical and mental health, and poorer interpersonal relationships and less chance of remarriage. The causes of these disadvantages include Chinese family beliefs, a culture of maternal sacrifice, the traditional division of labour between men and women and social stereotypes about single mothers. The article highlights the impacts of Chinese familism culture on single mothers and advocates incorporating a gender perspective into the agenda of family policy and other relevant social policies in China.

Keywords

China; familism culture; gender; poverty; single mothers; single parenthood; single-parent households; social policy

Issue

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1. Introduction

The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, which seek to eliminate extreme income poverty and halve all forms of poverty, has popularised the language of preventing people from ‘being left behind.’ China is a party to this UN initiative and has launched one of the most compelling poverty alleviation programs in the world. However, very little is known about the incidence and effect of poverty on women in China, especially single mothers.

This article seeks to fill this gap by exploring the issue of female poverty in China by examining single mothers. Single-parent households are increasingly common and have become a social concern in global contexts (Leung, 2016; Leung & Shek, 2015; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015). Single-parent households are more likely to be economically disadvantaged, and to fall below the poverty line, than two-parent households across countries (Christopher, 2005). As Freeman (2016, p. 675) explains, “the nuclear family remains the normative model, and single-parent-headed families continue to be

characterised in terms of ‘deficits and disadvantages’” (see also Zartler, 2014).

Single mothers far outnumber single fathers in China: They represented 70% of single-parent households in 2010 (National Health and Family Planning Commission, 2014). Single mothers are much more likely to be unhappy than single fathers for both social and economic reasons (Kramer, Myhra, Zuiker, & Bauer, 2015; Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013).

Socially, single mothers are excluded from mainstream social relationships. According to public opinion polls, they are perceived negatively (Zartler, 2014). These perceptions can be partially explained by traditional Chinese culture and conceptions of marriage, which do not recognise or approve of divorce. Therefore, single mothers often have the idea of fulfilling their children by sacrificing themselves (Leung, 2017). The influence of traditional culture has contributed to single mothers in China becoming ‘the poorest of the poor.’

Economically, single mothers have limited access to resources and public services. The need to care for chil-

dren restricts their employment opportunities, which makes it difficult for them to find jobs (Leung & Shek, 2015; Millar & Ridge, 2009). Therefore, families with a female head household with no husband are more likely to fall into poverty (Wang, 2002; Wang & Chu, 2009). According to the *Report on Living Conditions and Needs of Single Mothers in Ten Cities* (SWR), at least 25.6% of single-mother families living in China's first-tier cities are below the poverty line (CAMF, CWDF, & Vipshop Public Welfare, 2019). The SWR is based on a project that selected ten first-tier cities as sample cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Tianjin, Nanjing, Chengdu, Changsha, Shenyang, and Xi'an. A total of 1,206 questionnaires were collected, including 946 single mothers and 175 single fathers.

Studies on single mothers have focused on issues such as economic conditions, social network, mental health, and raising children (Brown & Moran, 1997; Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; Freeman, 2016; Millar & Ridge, 2009). Beyond these debates, single mothers have also received great attention from poverty researchers. Lower wages, lack of spousal support, and the burdens of raising children made single mothers specifically vulnerable (Brandy & Burroway, 2012; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015; Sorensen, 1994). Due to the intergenerational transmission of economic disadvantage and social status, their children are also more likely to live in poverty when they reach adulthood (Chant, 2007).

The development community characterises global poverty as having a female face (United Nations Development Programme, 1995). The available literature also supports the notion of the 'feminisation' of poverty. According to Pearce (1978), this notion has two levels of meaning: (1) The poor population is increasingly female and (2) the percentage of poor households headed by women is increasing. More recently, Chant (2007) has pointed out that the feminisation of poverty is characterised by a higher incidence of poverty, more severe and more permanent poverty among women, and single mothers facing a greater burden and higher obstacles to escaping poverty than men. The institutional culture of gender inequality leaves women few social resources with which to fight against poverty. As such, gender plays a staggering role in the income gap and poverty between single parents.

The concept of 'gender' first appeared in the international women's movement in the early 1970s. As a figure of gender theory, Ann Oakley (1972) pointed out in the book *Sex, Social Gender and Society* that gender division of labour is a social norm of intentional gender inequality caused by society. Gayle Rubin (1975) proposed the concept of 'gender system' as the root cause of women's subordination. She pointed out that the gender system is a patriarchal system based on male domination of women. This system restricts gender relations and controls the social and cultural life of human beings.

It is generally believed that gender theory includes three basic contents: gender differences, gender roles

and the gender system (Sun, 2013). On the basis of affirming gender differences, the gender system reveals a hierarchy and power relationship between men and women constructed by socio-cultural and social relationships. In gender culture, the concept of women is always considered negative and inferior to men. In gender relations, women are in fact subordinate and oppressed in all aspects. Following the gender roles approach, individuals have been disciplined by traditional gender culture since birth, and are shaped by thinking and behaviour, and then develop into 'men' and 'women' that meet social requirements. Based on the needs of this research, in order to incorporate gender theory into China studies, the author selected the gender system and gender roles as two levels to build the analysis framework.

The number of single-parent families headed by mothers is growing fast in China, and this group is increasing under the poverty line. Nevertheless, studies of single mothers in poverty remain scarce. Current studies have neglected to analyse the in-depth causes of single mothers' vulnerability and neglected to take a gendered perspective to explore the groups left behind in poverty. Based on fieldwork conducted in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, from a gender perspective, this article seeks to better understand how (and why) single mothers are disadvantaged. To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first to investigate the effect of China's familism culture on single-mother poverty.

2. Poor Single Mothers and Lone Parenthood in China

Since the reform and opening up in 1978, China has undergone significant changes in patterns of marriage, birth, migration and family development that challenge traditional family functions and responsibilities. For instance, families now tend to be smaller, and the family form is diversified. Divorce is the main factor in the production of single-parent families. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the divorce rate has been on the rise since 2000, nearly doubling between 2009 (2.47 million) and 2018 (4.46 million). The number of single mothers in China is estimated to reach nearly 20 million in 2020 (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2018; National Health and Family Planning Commission, 2014).

In general, China's poverty reduction policy lacks gender sensitivity, attention to the needs of poor women, and a focus on the needs of single mothers. Women's federations and non-governmental women's organisations are driving attention to women's poverty alleviation. These organisations participate in national poverty alleviation and development work, coordinate and integrate resources with government departments, and promote the introduction of relevant policies. They provide preferential services such as entrepreneurship, education and training, credit funds, and information services to help poor women escape from poverty (Ke, 2016).

However, due to the lack of a gender perspective in social policy, it is challenging to incorporate the sur-

vival and development issues of single mothers into the decision-making process; therefore, social and public policies do not adequately support their needs or those of their families (Li, 2007). At the same time, China's various family-related social policies are decentralised and fragmented. The government mostly provides family support in the form of subsidies, comprehensive and systematic policy support such as finance, taxation, public services, and social support is lacking. Government subsidies often fail to meet the needs of single-parent families.

In addition, the interests of single-parent families headed by women are not fully reflected and maintained in current marriage laws. Although the government has introduced many supporting provisions to guarantee equal rights to husband and wife, the lack of enforcement has made it difficult for many single mothers to get maintenance fees in full and on time.

In summary, since social policies in China have not been formulated with single mothers in mind, this growing and overlooked segment of society largely has to solve its problems on its own. This article examines how (and why) single mothers are disadvantaged and suggests operational policy implications to help improve their situation.

3. Research Method

This article reports the results of a qualitative study based on fieldwork in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province. Located on the western bank of the prosperous Pearl River Delta, Zhuhai is one of the five special economic zones that pioneered China's economic reforms. The city's GDP per capita was one of the highest in the country in 2017, at US\$22,100 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018). Meanwhile, there are also some social problems in Zhuhai, such as a large floating population, a huge gap between the rich and the poor, and the lack of protection of women's rights. It can be seen as a microcosm of fast-growing China. Therefore, the Zhuhai case would contribute to the existing scholarship on female poverty in China.

I conducted fieldwork from May to July 2019 as part of a larger program on low-income single mothers who participated in a community-based antipoverty program in Xiangzhou district of Zhuhai, the "Women's Development Plan." The program seeks to strengthen the communication between single mothers and the government through various activities and provides a social support platform for single-mother families. It is run by a non-profit organisation named Fulian, which is under the auspices of the Municipal Women's Federation. The incomes of the single mothers who received support were all below the poverty line and each faced various problems; therefore, the samples were strongly consistent with the goals of this study.

Three types of interviewees were selected for this study. Each interview was one to two hours in length. In

order to learn more about the group of single mothers from different aspects, in addition to single mothers, we interviewed government staff related to the "Women's Development Plan" and some community residents.

The first and most critical type of interviewees is single mothers ($n = 42$, coded M) who live with at least one child and are responsible for their upbringing. The author conducted one-to-one semi-structured interviews with these respondents, who are all participants of the "Women's Development Plan." More than half (52.4%) of the mothers interviewed were aged 40 to 49, 33.3% were aged 50 to 59, and 14.3% were aged 30 to 39. They had generally low levels of education: 38.3% had completed junior high school, while only 14.3% had a college education or above. Nearly two-thirds were divorced, nearly one-third were widows and a small number had never married. Almost equal proportions of the single mothers interviewed had one child (52.4%) and two children (47.6%). More than four-fifths (85.7%) lived alone with their children, yet most also support elderly family members: 33.3% help one older person, and 28.6% assist two elderly persons.

The second type of interviewees were staff members ($n = 8$, coded S) in the district government, the Municipal Women's Federation and communities. Two group interviews were conducted to discuss the living conditions of poor single mothers and the reasons why they were left behind in the socioeconomic sense compared with single fathers. Third, we interviewed ordinary residents of Xiangzhou district ($n = 22$, coded R) to compare general public perceptions of single mothers versus single fathers.

4. Findings: How Single Mothers Are Disadvantaged

Changes in marital status introduce multiple pressures on single mothers that make them extremely likely to fall into poverty. Most of the single mothers, government officials, community workers, and residents interviewed for this study reported that single mothers are more vulnerable than single fathers, and therefore face multiple risks. As a qualitative study, the author hand-coded first-hand interview notes obtained from fieldwork. The in-depth interviews revealed that single mothers are left behind in terms of income and economic conditions, employment and career development, physical and mental health, and interpersonal relationships and chances of remarriage.

4.1. Income and Economic Conditions

For families with parenting responsibilities, changing from dual to single parenting destroys the structure of the family's 'basic triangle.' This imbalance in family structure impairs economic resources, deteriorating the financial condition of single mothers and increasing the pressures associated with raising children (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Gunn, 2009).

Our fieldwork revealed that single mothers generally face economic pressures, and their main sources of income are wages and social assistance. Of the single mothers interviewed, in 2019, annual incomes were US\$2,845–4,267 for 33.3% of the sample, US\$4,267–5,689 for 38.1%, and over US\$5,689 for 19%. In contrast, the average annual income in Zhuhai was US\$11,522 in 2017 (Zhuhai Human Resources and Social Security Department, 2018). Annual expenditures of single-mother families are as high as 33.3% of more than US\$5,689. Most of the single mothers interviewed said the family's income was "not enough to make ends meet," and only a small portion of them said that "they were able to live within their means."

Not coincidentally, according to the SWR, more than 60% of single mothers in first-tier cities have a monthly income of less than 4,000 Yuan (CAMF et al., 2019). Of the single mothers who participated in the survey, the proportion of them who own property was 39.9%, which was 23.4% lower than the percentage for single fathers.

On average, single mothers spend about half of their total income on childcare each month. This is not only a consequence of the economic pressures they face; it also reflects single mothers' hopes for their children's future and a certain degree of compensation mentality for the child:

I have no money left every month. At the time of the divorce, he [the ex-husband] said that he would not pay for living expenses, and a child could not spend too much money. Because he is a native of Zhuhai, I don't even have a house after the divorce. My daughter is not guaranteed to live with me. Life is too hard. (M4, 27 May 2019)

In China, some women are used to relying on men financially, but over time, the pressure on their husbands will be more significant. If they divorce, the wife will face great difficulty in the economy. But men have little influence because they are in charge of making money. (S3, 20 June 2019)

One of my aunts is a single mother. She has three children. She doesn't have a fixed job and income after the divorce and lived on odd jobs. Life is hard. In order to take care of the children, she never married again. Her ex-husband, however, was soon reunited after the divorce, and his work and life seemed largely untouched. The older generation of single mothers that I know basically had very low incomes. (R2, 15 July 2019)

There is thus a growing consensus that single mothers face severe economic pressures compared with single fathers. In addition to worrying impoverishment, the country's weak social protection system exposes single mothers and children to risks.

4.2. Employment and Career Development

It is widely agreed both in literature and in my interviews that single mothers are disadvantaged in the job market. In addition to the gap in occupational income, single mothers also lag behind in job acquisition and career development.

Single mothers are more vulnerable to employment discrimination during the job search process due to their physical limitations and family responsibilities. Most of the single mothers interviewed were temporarily unemployed (33.3%) or unemployed (14.3%), and more than half felt that job hunting was difficult. Meanwhile, single mothers tend to focus on their children, making them less likely to be promoted, while single fathers may be more inclined to focus on developing their career:

I had a good job before I was sick, but I had to give it up to take care of my children. In contrast, it's easier for single fathers to make more money than us. (M6, 29 May 2019)

It is easier for a single father to find a job than a single mother. Even if you are doing physical work, men are better than women, and men are given priority when looking for a job. Men make more money. (M18, 21 June 2019).

Because mothers are the primary family caregivers, work-family conflicts are bound to affect their career development. Few single mothers have the opportunity to combine work and family; their happiness and living standards are greatly reduced by their weak economic conditions and living needs.

Furthermore, single mothers must often balance the conflicting roles and norms of employees and mothers. The interviewees explained that in their role as employees, single mothers need to comply with the rules and regulations of the work unit, complete the tasks, and accept unwritten constraints from colleagues and other subjects. Yet in their role as mothers, they must take care of their children's daily diet and spend time with them. The competing demands for their attention affect the quality of both their work and parenting. However, since single fathers often outsource childcare responsibilities to other family members, their role conflicts are less obvious:

I get up at four every morning, do housework, and take care of two children. After sending my daughter to school, I go to work and take my younger son with me because no one can take care of him at home. I feel that my boss is not satisfied. Single fathers are different. Children have other relatives to help bring them up, and men go to make money. (M9, 10 June 2019)

Compared with men, women have no advantage in their career. In order to maintain career competitive-

ness, single mothers are bound to invest more energy. But they also have to bear the housework and take care of their children, which is very difficult to balance. (R16, 18 July 2019)

In addition to lagging behind in career development, it is also difficult for single mothers to achieve a balance between work and family. The conflict between parenting and career development is a big challenge for both working and non-working single mothers.

4.3. Physical and Mental Health

The single mothers I interviewed who have lived under pressure for a long time are facing physical and mental health problems. Over two-thirds (67%) of the single mothers in the sample reported that they are in poor physical health and 19% think they are in ordinary health. Those with poor health often suffer from chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes, which require expensive long-term medication. The remaining 14% thought they were in good health, but still expressed concerns about their physical condition:

I don't have a big problem with my body now. But if I get sick, it will be miserable. With so little income, it is difficult to maintain a basic life. If I am still ill, how can I even live? (M29, 1 July 2019)

Single mothers who have given birth should not be overworked for a certain period of time. However, most men are still at the golden age of work after a divorce, which has little effect on them. Compared with single fathers, single mothers have physical disadvantages. (S1, 19 June 2019)

Single fathers are generally in better physical health than single mothers in the same age group, and typically have more valuable human capital, which confers advantages in other aspects, leading to multiple gender differences (Sung & Sun, 2018).

In addition to the problems associated with poverty and physical health, many single mothers suffer from mental health problems (Brown & Moran, 1997). According to the fieldwork conducted for this study, 80.9% of single mothers mentioned that the current psychological pressure on them was high.

This pressure is mainly derived from three areas. First, divorce and the death of a husband have an enormous impact on single mothers, coupled with the exhausting demands of day-to-day life, at work and with their children. Second, feeling guilty about the impact of single parenthood on their children and worrying about their growth often triggers self-blame and anxiety. According to the SWR, 90.6% of single mothers feel that they owe a debt to their children, particularly for failing to provide a complete family (46.0%; CAMF et al., 2019). Interviewees recognised that single-parent fami-

lies have additional negative effects on children. For instance, 25.5% of the single mothers interviewed for this study said that the social environment is "unfriendly" to single-parent families. The third pressure comes from society. The perception and acceptance of single mothers within the community greatly affect the psychological status of single mothers in China. According to the SWR, 61.9% of respondents believe society has a low acceptance of single mothers (CAMF et al., 2019).

Worse still, single mothers have a high probability of feeling inferior and depressed due to their life experiences. Many single mothers' marital experiences seriously affect their desire for social interaction; they often confine themselves to a narrow social circle (Wang & Chu, 2009):

Three of our project assistance objects have serious psychological problems. Most of the others are relatively closed, do not participate in social activities, and do not communicate with others. The problems are sensitivity, inferiority, resistance, and so on. There are few single mothers in normal single-parent status. One of them always feels that people around her are targeting her. She felt helpless and didn't know what to do. (S2, 20 June 2019)

In short, single mothers are both physically and psychologically disadvantaged. Yet the government's social protection system largely overlooks these problems.

4.4. Interpersonal Relationships and Chances of Remarriage

The purpose of interpersonal communication is to obtain additional social capital or to consolidate one's existing social capital. However, changes in family structure have a particular impact on social capital. The situation of single-parent families (and particularly with single mothers) will directly or indirectly encourage them to reduce their interactions with the outside world. Furthermore, negative social stereotypes and social exclusion affect single mothers' social integration (Wang & Guo, 2010).

According to the SWR, due to economic pressure and the burden of being the primary family caregiver, 34.3% of the respondents believe that being a single mother harmed their social interactions (CAMF et al., 2019). Single mothers are also affected by stigma and social exclusion to a certain extent, and unfriendly speech and behaviour hinder their social integration. By contrast, single fathers' social capital is less affected by changes in the family structure, and these modifications do not reduce their interpersonal relationships due to the more widespread acceptance of social networks for single fathers:

There were some friends before the divorce. But when you are divorced, everyone feels that you are poor, and cut off contact with you gradually.

Society is very realistic, so I don't bother others when I encounter problems. And my life circle is getting smaller and smaller. But my ex-husband's life has not changed; he still has a bunch of friends. (M13, 12 June 2019)

Gender differences also exist in remarriage: Single mothers are less likely to remarry in urban China. Single fathers are more inclined to re-establish families, but most single mothers give negative answers. The interviews revealed that when contemplating remarriage, single mothers need to consider the feelings of their children, the acceptance of the remarriage market, the attitude of significant others and their objective conditions. Single fathers consider fewer factors and therefore have higher remarriage rates.

According to the SWR, among the single mothers surveyed, more than 70% claimed that they never had love partners after becoming single (CAMF et al., 2019). The underlying reason is that single mothers' dual identity as 'self' and 'mother' raises the stakes for remarriage requirements. In a single mother's mind, the ideal marriage partner should first meet their expectations, and then be kind to her child; both are indispensable. The pursuit of a perfect marriage and the reality of being excluded from the marriage market have made it difficult for single mothers to marry, forcing many single mothers to 'actively' choose singlehood:

Men will remarry, but not necessarily women. And the child is too young, how can I think about remarriage? Besides, I have to consider a lot of things if I choose to remarry. First, am I suitable for him? Second, will he be kind to my child? I don't have any confidence in any man now, wanting to bring up my children. (M14, 18 June 2019)

Single fathers can find young ones, but single mothers can only find old ones, or many lose faith in marriage and love and never marry again. (R4, 15 July 2019)

On the one hand, a single father's interpersonal communication will not change because of his single-parent status, while a single mother will actively or passively reduce her social interactions, thus decreasing her accumulation of social capital and weakening her social support network. On the other hand, the remarriage market 'prefers' single fathers; single mothers are excluded because of their self/mother dual status. Exclusion from the remarriage market is one of the main reasons for the vulnerability of single mothers, which increases their family poverty.

5. Discussion: A Gender Perspective

As analysed above, gender inequality contributes significantly to the disadvantage of single mothers. This article explores the deeper reasons why single-mother families

are more likely to fall into poverty from the perspective of the gender system and gender roles.

5.1. Gender System: Chinese Family Beliefs and Maternal Sacrifice Culture

A complete social gender system has developed over time that is closely related to a country's economic and political system and plays an essential role in maintaining social stability. China's gender system is based on the notion that males are superior to females (*nan zun nv bei*) and has constructed a mainstream discourse system in a patriarchal society. This system lays the cultural foundation for the vulnerability of single mothers. Single mothers have a relatively low social status within this system, and they tend to believe that family is at the core of life and follow the cultural norms of subordination and sacrifice.

Chinese family beliefs constitute the laws underlying the operation of society as a whole. Yang (2006, p. 300) defined familism as "a person's complex system of social attitudes toward their family, family members, and family-related affairs." Family obligations, family reputation, maintenance of social relationships, and respect for seniors and parents are foundational elements of Chinese collective familism (King & Bond, 1985; Leung, 2017).

Under patriarchal ethics, the man has decision-making authority in a family; thus, family beliefs have particular implications for single mothers. Women's low social and family status gives them fewer resources in terms of education, human capital, and social capital than men, which limits their development prospects. Interviewees confirmed that they did not receive a fair distribution of family resources during their childhood, which resulted in a limited education and further difficulties in career development, forming a vicious circle of poverty.

Under the impact of familism, Chinese parents focus on family solidarity and family pride (Yeh & Yang, 1997). Although it has entered modern society, divorce in China is still not acceptable to some parents. What's more, the older generation of parents thought that divorce would shame the family. Therefore, sometimes divorced single mothers face not only social exclusion but also family exclusion. In reality, some women may maintain an unhappy marriage in order to keep their family complete.

Female subordination and the culture of maternal sacrifice are another integral part of the Chinese gender system. In Chinese culture, parenthood implies undertaking "responsibility for the children" and "making a sacrifice for the benefit of the children" (Lam, 2005). This sacrifice requires parents to abandon their own personal needs and interests for the sake of their children. They consider their children's developmental needs as more important than their own needs (Leung, 2017).

Moreover, the gender system based on the assumption that males are superior to females is more evident

in the family domain, where women occupy subordinate positions. Especially in low-income families, women reduce their own living needs to the lowest level and have the attribute of 'sacrifice,' that is, 'self-poverty' (Wang, 2018). In single-mother families, the dependents and objects of sacrifice for single mothers shift from husbands to children, giving priority to the needs of the children. They invest lots of time, money, energy, and emotions in parenting, and even make extreme self-sacrifices (Chant, 2009; Elliott et al., 2015). Hence, based on the altruism and submissive norms of women under the gender system, single mothers subordinate their own needs to the needs of their children and are even willing to sacrifice their career development and emotional and physical health.

Furthermore, influenced by Chinese traditional culture, single mothers tend to form self-role cognition of family care as a duty. As a result of this role cognition, single mothers spend most of their time caring for their family and accompanying their children, which severely affects their career development and social interactions, thus increasing the probability of falling into extreme poverty.

Therefore, single mothers and single fathers have different self-role orientations and cognitions. Single mothers are responsible for family care, while single fathers are career-oriented, which results in differences in personal development. Because of this, single mothers are always lagging behind.

5.2. Gender Roles: Social Division of Labour and Social Stereotypes

Gender roles refer to the fact that different genders have different role norms in social culture, and both men and women are virtually constrained and restricted by role norms. The gender roles of single fathers and single mothers are quite different. Single mothers are often left behind in their gender roles in two ways. First, the fixed division of labour between a men-dominated 'outside' and a women-dominated 'inside' (*nan zhu wai nv zhu nei*) reduces the importance of single mothers' social role. Second, social stereotypes and negative public opinion prevent single mothers from integrating into society.

The family role model—as in the traditional saying—of "men farming and women weaving" (*nan geng nv zhi*) laid the foundation of Chinese traditional culture, and the social division of labour still has a significant influence in modern society. Gender biases tend to suggest that women should devote more time to their families. Public opinion holds that they should sacrifice their career to take care of their families and cannot devote themselves to their jobs (Huo & Lin, 2015).

The social division of labour along gender lines has brought employment discrimination and other problems to single mothers. Employers' biased impressions of single mothers have led them to unemployment and unstable employment, which has increased their chances of

falling into poverty. However, it is socially acceptable for single fathers to prioritise their career, which further increases the gender gap.

In addition, gender stereotypes of single mothers are widespread. They are considered to be fragile, difficult to get along with, encumbered by children, and so on. Social stereotypes make it more difficult for them to integrate into society, which leads to disparate treatment for single mothers. To a large extent, this stigmatisation harms public opinion, social relations, career development and remarriage.

6. Conclusion

This study has explored the issue of female poverty in China by examining single-mother households. Based on the investigations conducted in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, we found that single mothers are left behind in the fields of income and economic conditions, employment and career development, physical and mental health, as well as interpersonal relationships and chances of remarriage. It is important to reiterate that we have discussed the deeper reasons why single-mother families are more likely to fall into poverty from the perspective of gender systems and gender roles.

The research makes three main contributions. First, it enriches our knowledge on the living conditions of poor single mothers in China as well as our understanding of how and why single mothers are disadvantaged. Second, it employed two particular factors to explain the poor condition of single mothers—traditional Chinese family beliefs and maternal sacrifice culture. Third, it draws more attention to the Chinese government and society to the single-mother group.

The article highlights the limitations of current social policies that fail to acknowledge the impact of the country's familism culture and the public pressures affecting single mothers. These findings have at least three important policy implications. First, great importance should be given to women's rights and gender equality in order to eliminate gender and identity discrimination. Second, the current family-based childcare model should be reconsidered: Multiple forms of childcare should be developed to alleviate the conflict between single mothers' work and family responsibilities and enable them to achieve better professional development. Third, in order to fight for women's rights and gender equality, it is exceptionally urgent to incorporate a gender perspective into the agenda of family policy and other relevant social policies. Economic assistance and psychological help should be integral to social programs to help single-mother families escape poverty and obtain fairer development opportunities.

The study suffers from two main limitations. First, due to social stereotypes, single mothers are a relatively hidden group, partly because they are usually reluctant to disclose their single-parent status. The sample selected for this survey is more concentrated on single

mothers who have already expressed an urgent need for social support. This will affect the representativeness of the sample to a certain extent. Second, while the overall situation of single-father households is better than that of single mothers, some single fathers are less economically secure and thus also require social attention, support and services.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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